

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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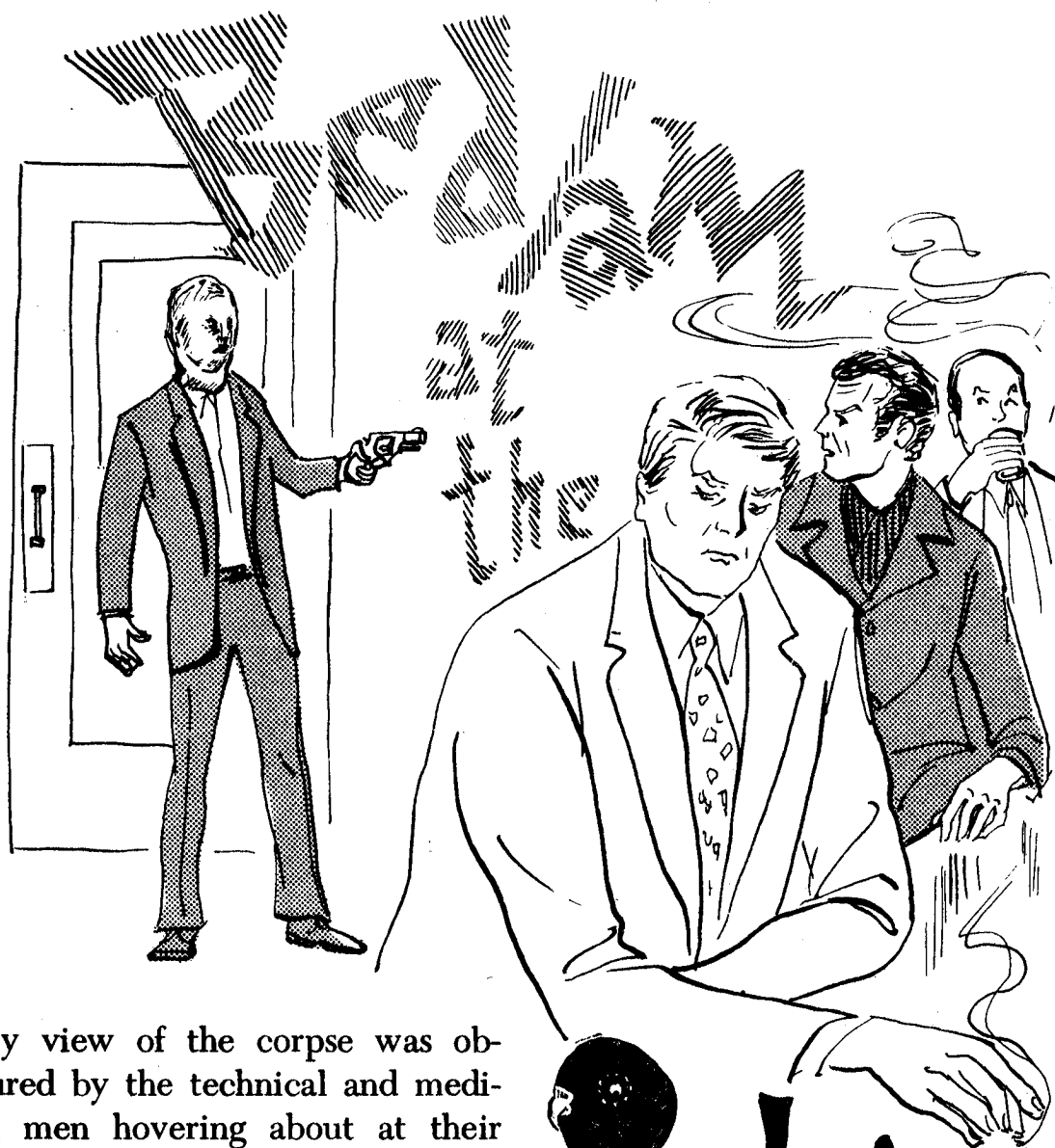
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The corpse on the barroom floor is cause for more consternation than any picture of Madeleine.



My view of the corpse was obscured by the technical and medical men hovering about at their jobs. "What was he drinking when he was shot?" I asked.

The bartender scratched his neck. "He just finished ordering a bloody mary when he got killed."

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My partner, Ralph, joined us just as the bartender retold his story. "It was a little after three this afternoon and the door to the street opened and this man stepped inside. He had a woman's stocking pulled over his head and he yelled, 'McGeorge,' and then he shot that man on the floor."

I indicated the body. "Is his name McGeorge?"

The bartender's eyes flickered. "I don't know what his name is."

"Then he wasn't a regular customer?"

"I never saw him before in my life."

Ralph had the victim's wallet. "His driver's license says he's

by Jack Ritchie

James E. Cullen, 173 Courtwood Apartments, and his birth date makes him forty-two years old."

I regarded the seven other witnesses to the crime. "Is there a McGeorge in the house?"

They looked at each other, but none of them came forward.

I frowned. "Why would the killer call the victim McGeorge, if he isn't McGeorge?"

The bartender shrugged. "After he shot this man, he turned and ran out. And then this man here,"

he indicated one of the witnesses, "pulled out a gun and chased after him."

Dave Campbell, one of the department's newer officers, had been off-duty having a drink, when the killing occurred. He was still rather pale. "I never saw anybody killed before."

Ralph nodded sympathetically. "You chased the killer?"

Dave nodded. "It all happened so fast. I mean I wasn't expecting anything like that. I was sort of shocked. Like everybody else. But then I came out of it and took after him. When I got to the door, I could see him ahead down the block, just about to duck into the alley. I got off one shot before he disappeared."

"Did you hit him?" Ralph asked.

"Not exactly. But I'm sure I creased him."

"Creased?"

"Well, I could see my slug chip off a piece of the building beyond him, but I think it creased him on the way past because he sort of jumped before he disappeared and put his hand back here." Dave indicated his own posterior.

"Ah," I said, "The *gluteus maximus*. Right or left?"

"I think it was both. Not through, you know. Just creased."

A technician joined us for a mo-

ment. "Six shots were fired. Four missed Cullen. One got him in the left arm and the other right through the heart."

Dave continued. "By the time I got to the alley he was out of sight. The alley leads to another one that runs up and down the block. I looked around, but I couldn't find him. He was about medium height and on the thin side."

I turned back to the bartender. "What's the name of this place? The Red Budgie?"

"Blue Budgie."

The Blue Budgie was a nightclub, but at this time of the afternoon only the street bar was open.

"Who's the owner?"

The bartender quickly pointed to one of the witnesses. "Ask Mr. Wister. He's the manager."

Wister came forward rather slowly.

"Who *does* own this place?" I asked.

"A corporation."

"What corporation?"

Wister seemed to sigh. "The Ajax-Helot Corporation."

Ralph drew me aside, out of the earshot of the others. "Henry, Ajax-Helot is Big Joe McGeorge, and Big Joe McGeorge is Ajax-Helot. And either one of them means *syndicate* in this town. In other

words, Henry, the killer got the wrong man. He was after Big Joe McGeorge."

"Oh," I said, "*that* McGeorge. But the killer shot Cullen?"

"It was dim in here and he came in off the sunny street. He couldn't see too good, but he couldn't just stand there, holding the gun and with that stocking over his head waiting to get used to the light. So he yelled, 'McGeorge,' and when Cullen turned, the killer shot him."

I went back to the bartender. "Why didn't you tell me the killer meant Big Joe McGeorge?"

He nervously wiped the bar top with a rag. "I don't know nothing from nothing. I just work here."

I returned to Wister. "Was McGeorge here today?"

"Well, yes."

"When?"

"This afternoon. He came in at about two-fifteen."

"Does he come here at that same time every day?"

"No. He'll show up maybe once a month to check up on things and have a drink."

"When did he leave?"

"Around three. About five minutes before the shooting. I let him out the back door."

"Why the back door?"

"It was closer to the parking lot where he'd left his car."

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"Did he come in the back door too?"

"No. The back doors are always kept locked and we probably wouldn't have heard him if he knocked. He used the front door to get in."

Ralph had been thinking. "Since McGeorge doesn't seem to have a regular schedule about coming here, the killer must have been following him. He saw McGeorge go in, but he didn't see him leave."

I was inclined to agree. "We'll have to question Big Joe McGeorge for possible leads to the killer's identity."

Ralph pulled me into a corner again. "Henry, the killer don't have no identity. What I mean is, he's a hit man and McGeorge wouldn't know him from Adam. This is syndicate business and we never have any luck solving syndicate hits. Like Lorenzo Thomas found dead in the trunk of his car last year."

"But we've got to at least *question* McGeorge."

"Sure. But let me do the talking."

Ralph and I finished taking the statements of all the witnesses, plus that of another customer who had been in the washroom at the time of the shooting. Then we got into our car and left to inform

Mrs. Cullen of her husband's death.

At the Courtwood Apartments, I pressed the buzzer beside apartment 210.

A striking woman with ample black hair, narrow dark eyes, and a generous, but controlled, figure, opened the door.

"Mrs. Bernard Cullen?" Ralph asked.

"Yes."

We identified ourselves and Ralph said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Mrs. Cullen."

She regarded us for a moment or two more and then invited us in. When Ralph finished telling her what had happened to Cullen, she dabbed with a tissue at what appeared to be a perfectly dry eye, and then took further consolation in a cigarette.

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "was your husband a wealthy man?"

Ralph looked a bit pained.

Mrs. Cullen raised an eyebrow. "Bernie? He had his job and that was that."

"No life insurance?"

"He had ten thousand."

"And you are the beneficiary?"

"No. His mother is. Bernie wanted to see how our marriage worked out before he committed himself."

"How long have you been mar-

ried to Bernie?" I asked her.

"Three years."

Ralph had been fidgeting. "Mrs. Cullen, we have reason to believe that your husband was killed by mistake."

While he explained that part of Cullen's death, I glanced about the room. There was only one bookcase and that was used as a room divider. It did not contain a single book; just ceramic elephants and things of that sort. Deplorable.

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "did your husband frequent the Pink Budgie regularly?"

"Blue Budgie," Ralph said.

She shrugged. "I never heard of either place before. Bernie took a drink now and then, but he wasn't a regular anywhere. When he felt like a drink, he just dropped into the nearest place."

"Did he have any nicknames?" I asked.

"Nicknames?"

"Yes. Beside Bernie, I mean. Like Muscles, or Shorty, or McGeorge, for instance?"

Ralph looked at me. "Who would have a nickname like McGeorge?"

"You'd be surprised," I said. "I had a friend in high school whose nickname was McGillicutty. Her real name was Hildegard."

"No," Mrs. Cullen said, "every-

body he knew called him Bernie."

"Did Bernie have any enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "do you wear a wig?"

Ralph closed his eyes.

"No," she said. "All of this is my own."

Ralph handed her one of our cards. "If there's anything we can do for you, just call this number."

Downstairs, I said, "It occurred to me that the killer might have been a woman disguised as a man. If Mrs. Cullen wears a wig, that means she really has short hair and could pass off as a man."

Ralph regarded me with some pity. "Henry, do you really think for one minute she could really pass for a man? With a *built* like that?"

"Actually, I was about to ask about that next."

Ralph drove us, somewhat reluctantly, I thought, to Big Joe McGeorge's residence on the lake-front drive.

We were stopped at the entrance by a closed gate and our credentials were examined by a uniformed guard before we were allowed to continue. We followed the usual winding drive until we again saw daylight at a gravel oval in front of the main building, which was situated on a bluff

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that overlooked Lake Michigan.

A male servant led us to a large room in which the ceiling was a considerable distance from the floor. Ralph and I were left to wait.

Ralph took out one of his cigars, studied it, and then apparently decided that igniting a fifteen-cent cigar in a room like this was not entirely appropriate.

I wandered to some wall bookshelves. The contents proved to be standard classic, uncut, and no volume younger than 1914.

I sat down beside the phone and counted the number of McGeorges in the directory next to it.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty.

I rose and wandered off into the adjacent rooms and halls in an effort to discover human life.

In another large room I paused before the marble fireplace. A huge ethereal painting of a young woman hung above the mantel.

She appeared to be in her early twenties, clad in something resembling a Grecian gown. For my taste, her brown eyes appeared a bit too close together. In the background a number of man-goat mutations danced and piped enthusiastically and, in the far distance, the viewer was given a glimpse of a cloud-shrouded

vaguely outlined Acropolis.

Behind me, a woman's voice said, "Ah, so you've fallen in love with her too, haven't you?"

"Well, no," I said. "Frankly I haven't even come close."

I turned and looked at a girl, also in her early twenties, but blue-eyed, with amber hair, and wearing rather large glasses.

She frowned up at the painting. "*Everybody* falls in love with her."

"Who is she?"

"Dora."

"Dora who?"

"Dora McGeorge."

Big Joe McGeorge strode into the room, flanked by two remarkably husky men. An older, faintly perspiring man followed in their wake.

McGeorge appeared to be of about average weight and height. He stopped when he saw me, glanced up at the portrait, and smiled. "So you've fallen in love with her too, eh?"

"Actually, no," I said. "Her eyes are much too . . ."

He chuckled. "*Everybody* falls in love with Dora." He turned to his entourage. "Isn't that right, boys?"

They gazed reverently at the painting and nodded. I had the distinct impression they were not faking it.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," McGeorge said. "But I had to wait for my lawyer. Can't go anywhere or say anything without a lawyer these days." He indicated the perspiring man. "This is Hannigan."

Hannigan wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I got here as fast as I could, Joe."

I noticed that the girl had disappeared; and where was Ralph? I thought he might have wandered after me, but evidently not.

We all took seats.

"All right," McGeorge said, "let's get down to business. To save you trouble, I'll tell you that Wister phoned and told me all about what happened. That's why you're here, aren't you? The killer yelled 'McGeorge' and you put two and two together?"

"Do you have any idea who might want to kill you?"

He appeared shocked at the very thought. "Me? I'm a friend to everybody and everybody's my friend. I got no enemies. None in this world. It must've been some other McGeorge he was after."

I nodded. "A possibility which has not escaped me. There are eighteen McGeorges listed in the telephone directory for this city and suburbs. None of them is you."

"My phone's unlisted. Keeps the

house much quieter that way."

"Why are you called Big Joe? You seem about average size to me."

"It's one of those things that gets passed on. Before me there was Big Max, Big Sig, and Big Arnie. Arnie was only five-foot-two."

"Do you spend much time at the Brown Budgie?"

"Blue Budgie. No. Why should I?"

"But you own the place, don't you?"

"So I own it. And I got a manager there to run it for me. Besides, the Blue Budgie isn't the only place I got. There's at least a dozen—"

Hannigan pulled urgently at McGeorge's sleeve and McGeorge stopped.

"However, you were at the Blue Budgie earlier today? At about two-thirty?"

"Sure," McGeorge said. "Me and Eddie and Freddie." He indicated the two burly men with him. "I checked over the books, then we stopped at the bar for a drink. But we left before the shooting."

"Eddie and Freddie are your bodyguards?"

"Friends. I never go anywhere without them."

"Are they armed?"

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from Hannigan. "I wouldn't know. I don't pry into their personal business."

"It occurred to me that some outside syndicate might be trying to move into town."

He glowered at the thought. "I been making phone calls, but there's nothing in the air. Absolutely nothing." He ignored the sleeve pulls. "If anybody was trying to move in, I'd know about it."

"There is another possibility," I said. "Suppose this is an *inside* job, so to speak. Somebody inside your organization wants to take over."

Hannigan's chair tipped over backward and he fell to the floor. He rose immediately, his face white. "Not me, Big Joe. I don't know anything about administration. I wouldn't even *think* of anything like taking over. Never, Big Joe. I swear it on my mother's mausoleum."

McGeorge frowned at him. "I never even thought about you for ten seconds."

"Mr. McGeorge," I said, "as long as I'm here, I'd like to review another matter—the case of Lorenzo Thomas. He was found in the trunk of his car last year. It appeared that he'd been there for three weeks or more. Somebody passing the garage on a hot day

smelled something suspicious and called the police. I understand that Lorenzo was a member of your syndicate."

McGeorge snorted. "Member of the syndicate? He was a bowling machine repairman and when something went wrong at one of my lanes, we gave him our business. Every time somebody turns up in the trunk of a car, you right away yell 'syndicate.' Personally I think his wife did it. I asked around. They fought like cats and dogs. She never even reported him missing. And why would she take a taxi to and from the supermarket for three weeks when their car was right there in the garage?"

"Why didn't you take your suspicions to the police?"

"Me? Why should I get involved? I'm a taxpayer. Why should I do your job for you?"

When I left McGeorge and his associates, I ran into the amber-haired girl again in the hall. She undertook the task of guiding me to the front door.

"By the way," I said, "what is your name and status around here?"

"I'm Dora McGeorge."

I stopped. "You mean that the girl in the painting is supposed to be *you*?"

"More or less."

"But her eyes are too close together. Besides, they're brown and yours are blue."

"Dad had the painting commissioned when I was only six months old. It's a projection of what he thought I'd look like when I grew up. When I was sixteen and tried my first and last martini, I got a ladder and painted glasses on Dora. Also I changed her eyes to brown. Dad had the glasses cleaned off, but he thought brown eyes looked nice and left them that way."

We resumed our journey to the exit. "Do you have a spare stocking?" I asked.

She blinked. "Why?"

"I'd like to put it over my head. It's an experiment. I'd go out and buy a pair, but I think that's spendthrift, considering that I wouldn't be using them for more than a minute or two."

She studied me. "How did you ever get on the police force in the first place?"

"There was this appeal for applicants and my father thought that I ought to get into something worthy instead of reading all the time. But I've really enjoyed police work, except for that time when I had to deliver twins."

She led me to a small room and stepped behind the cover of a sofa. She removed one of her

stockings and tossed it to me.

I slipped it over my head and peered about. My vision was a bit impeded, but not too much. However, the room was quite light. "Pull the blinds, please," I said.

She hesitated. "I don't know if I should. You're a weirdo."

I moved into the shadow of an alcove instead. There was now some difficulty in seeing. I took off the stocking.

"Don't you travel in pairs?" Dora asked. "Like nuns?"

"Nuns don't travel in pairs anymore. Unless they happen to be going to the same place, of course, and then it could be triplets, or more."

"I mean detectives. Police officers."

I snapped my fingers. "I knew I'd forgotten something."

We retraced our steps and found Ralph standing enrapt before the painting of Dora.

"Ah," I said, "so you've fallen in love with her too, eh?"

He nodded. "Who is she?"

"Not of this world," I said. "She's beyond reach."

Ralph sighed. "Dead, huh? Well, maybe it's better that way. There's nothing like reality to louse up a dream." His mind returned to duty. "When the hell is McGeorge going to see us?"

"It's already happened," I said.

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"I'll tell you about it in the car."

On the way back to the city, I told him about my meeting with McGeorge.

"I'm not so sure that syndicate comes into the picture at all," I said. "McGeorge doesn't think so either."

"That's what you'd expect him to say." Ralph rubbed his chin. "You actually think that Cullen's killing might not have been a mistake? But who would want to kill him?"

"There's Mrs. Cullen."

"Like I said once before, she could never pass off as a man."

"Probably not. But couldn't she hire or persuade somebody to do the job for her?"

"What would be her motive? Money? There's the ten thousand insurance, but the beneficiary is Cullen's mother. Maybe Mrs. Cullen had ideas of taking the thing to court? After all, she's his wife and she could claim that he just forgot to get his insurance beneficiary changed."

I shook my head. "Besides the uncertainty of a favorable court decision, I don't think there's really enough money involved to tempt her to murder. At least not enough insurance money."

"But Cullen didn't leave anything else."

"That's what she implied, but

do we have to believe her? Doesn't it strike you that a man as monetarily cautious as Cullen would also be the kind of a man who *saved* his money too?"

"So maybe he left money. But would his will probably leave that to his mother also?"

"If there is a will. Of course his wife could contest it with a good chance of winning at least a sizable compromise. However, the litigation might drag on for years and lawyers' fees would take their toll of the estate. No, the happiest thing for Mrs. Cullen would be if Cullen died intestate. Without leaving a will. That would automatically make her the heir. So if there is a will, it would be to her interest to find and destroy it as soon as possible."

"She might have done that already."

"I don't think she's had the chance yet. Being such a cautious man, I think it's a good bet that Cullen has the will, if there is one, in his safe-deposit box. And since he did not have enough confidence in his wife to make her his insurance beneficiary, I doubt very much if he provided her with a key or that she even knows where it is."

"Suppose she found the key and destroyed the will *before* arranging for Cullen to be killed?"

"A strong possibility. After all, killing a man on the speculation that you *might* find the key to his safe-deposit box and *might* be able to destroy a will which *might* exist, is tenuous at best. Which brings us to another possibility. Mrs. Cullen could conceivably have had nothing at all to do with her husband's death. This, however, might not prevent her from taking advantage of his demise by destroying his will."

At headquarters, we dropped in at the morgue and talked to the attendant in charge. "Do you still have Bernard Cullen's personal effects?" I asked.

He brought out a large brown envelope and opened it. I went through its contents and found a small flat key—obviously for a safe-deposit box.

"We almost missed that," the attendant said. "Cullen kept it in his sock. There's a callus shaped like the key on the ball of his right foot. Another thing. His wife just called. She wanted to know when she could pick up his personal effects. I told her after you were through with the case."

"Good. Don't let anybody have any of Cullen's things until I give the word. Especially not that key."

Ralph and I walked back to the elevator.

"At this very moment," I said, "I suspect that Mrs. Cullen is tearing apart her apartment looking for the duplicate of that key."

Ralph blinked. "Duplicate? I never thought of that. Sure, there'd be a duplicate for something like that. Suppose she finds it?"

"I don't think she will."

"Why not?"

I smiled. "I think his mother has it."

I got home to my apartment at six. Usually I make my own meals, principally because I detest dining out, but also because I am the only person who knows what, how, and when I want to eat. I put together my favorite casserole—chopped dried beef, mushroom soup, peas, and chop suey noodles—shoved it into the oven at 350 degrees for thirty minutes, and then ate.

When I finished my milk, I reached for the phone, but then remembered that the McGeorge number was unlisted.

I showered, shaved and transferred my personal possessions to my best suit, then drove to the gates of the McGeorge estate.

The gatekeeper phoned ahead and Dora opened the front door herself. "I felt strangely chilly this afternoon and I finally realized that you've still got my stocking."

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I removed it from my pocket. "I discovered it when I got home. I would have phoned you not to fret, worry, or become generally despondent. I would have mailed it back. But your number isn't listed and it takes a court order to get the telephone company to release those things, so I thought I might as well return it myself."

She led me to one of the rooms off the hall. "I suppose you're off-duty? Would you care for a drink? Bourbon, whiskey, rum?"

"Well . . . perhaps a small glass of sherry."

She regarded me for a moment. "All righty."

She found the bottle after an extensive search of the liquor cabinet. "My father told me all about what's been going on. He always does. With the exception of certain business matters. He doesn't want me to have to lie if I ever have to get on a witness stand."

She poured two glasses and handed one to me. "Dad doesn't think the killing of this Cullen had anything to do with the syndicate. *Any* syndicate. Do you?"

"I have my doubts. If this was a syndicate hit, the killer would have to be a professional, right?"

"Right."

"Would a professional fire six shots and miss four times?"

"Never. But I suppose the light was bad?"

"I think a professional would have anticipated the situation and made allowances instead of suddenly appearing in the doorway with a stocking over his head. And if this was a professional job, wouldn't the killer have been provided with all pertinent information about his target, including the fact that he had an escort of two bodyguards?"

"Absolutely."

"Then would a professional killer wildly fire six shots, leaving himself with an *empty* gun in the face of those two armed bodyguards? And then there's the get-away itself. It might not be mandatory to have a car waiting—preferably with a driver and a running motor—but making your escape on foot seems to be a little chancy, doesn't it?"

Dora agreed. "And that bit about the killer shouting 'McGeorge.' What was really the point of that as a means of identification of his victim? I'll bet *everybody* at the bar turned around. It's just normal to turn around when somebody opens a door and yells 'McGeorge,' or 'Attila the Hun,' or anything. Even if your name is Smith or Bluebeard."

"Exactly. Therefore we come to the conclusion that it was only the

killer's *intent* to make the incident seem like a syndicate killing. But he really wasn't after McGeorge at all."

"Cullen?"

"It bears thinking, doesn't it?"

"Would you care for another sherry?"

"No, thank you. I'd like to keep a clear head. I still have to drive back."

Before I left, at ten, I learned, among other things, that while at college she had been elected Miss Bookworm of 1972, an honor achieved when the Reference Room crowd voted for her *en bloc*.

Back in the city, on impulse, I drove on to the Purple Budgie, or whatever. I left my car in a parking garage and walked the half block to the nightclub. A poster in front indicated that the current featured singer was one Amy Adams.

I opened the door to the bar. The room was now considerably crowded, smoke-ridden, and humming with a blend of noise. In the background, beyond the bar, I could hear a band and a woman in combat with a song.

I raised my voice and shouted, "Suleiman the Magnificent!"

A dozen or so souls nearest the door turned, looked amused, confused, or shrug-shouldered, and

then returned to their drinks.

Wister, the manager, had evidently been within earshot. He approached me. "Did you say something about Kubla Khan?"

"It's funny how people confuse the two," I said. "I guess that's because Kubla Khan is more familiar, so people have a tendency to transpose, even if they aren't at all alike."

"Would you like a table?" Wister asked.

I was about to refuse, but he added, "It's on the house, of course."

"Well . . . my feet *are* a bit tired."

He led me through the bar to the main room and found a small table near the service doors. Certainly not the choicest table in the house, but adequate. He appeared about to sit down with me, but changed his mind. "What would you like to drink?"

"A glass of sherry, please."

He relayed my order to a waiter and still lingered. "Have you any idea who the killer might be yet?"

"We're still working at it. Did you know the victim, Cullen?"

"No."

"Did you know his wife?"

He frowned. "His wife? Why should I know his wife when I don't know him?"

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"One thing doesn't necessarily follow the other."

"I haven't even the faintest idea of what she looks like."

"Is it common knowledge that McGeorge owned this place?"

"I wouldn't say exactly common."

"Would the employees here know?"

"I imagine so. Though probably not the customer who comes in off the street."

He went off to greet a pair of customers.

My sherry arrived and I tasted it—really cooking sherry. It's surprising how often that happens to me.

The other chair at my table was pulled back and a man sat down. "Hi," he said. "How's the murder business?"

He was in his middle thirties, quite flashy, and he had been drinking some or more. His face seemed familiar.

Ah, yes. He was one of the witnesses to Cullen's murder. No, not actually a *witness*. He had been in the lavatory when the murder occurred. Roberts? Romer? Rodell? Yes, that was it. Rodell.

On the small spotlighted stage, Amy Adams renewed her clutch on the microphone and breathed into a new number.

Rodell took the cigar out of his

mouth. "She's got a terrific voice, right?"

I listened carefully for half a minute. "Actually her voice is quite thin. However, if she is really musically inclined, I'd suggest that she take up an instrument instead. I knew a girl in high school who switched from mezzo-soprano to the harp and never regretted it. Hildegard was her name, though most people called—"

"She's my wife."

"Hildegard? I didn't even know she was—"

"I mean Amy Adams." He indicated the stage.

Adams? Rodell? Oh, yes. Adams was her stage name. I cleared my throat. "On the other hand, a lot of people *like* thin voices. Perhaps even a majority. How long has she been booked here?"

"Three months."

I chuckled. "At least she has a steady job. I suppose you have to give some credit to her manager?"

"I'm her manager."

I sipped my sherry. "Did you know that Big Joe McGeorge owned this place?"

"Sure."

"Were you acquainted with the victim? Cullen?"

"Like I told you this afternoon, I never saw him before."

"Did your wife know him?"

"Why should my wife know him?"

"I mean perhaps she doesn't exactly know his name, but she might have seen him here some night? With another woman?"

"I don't think so."

I excused myself and went to the men's room. It had only one small opaque window, probably leading to the alley. I tested the bars latticing it. Really quite solidly imbedded in the framework, there seemed to be no possible way to remove them without causing extensive damage.

I frowned. Rodell had said he had been in the lavatory during the killing, but was it necessarily the *men's* lavatory? After all, there had been no women in the barroom, so the women's powder room must have been empty. Rodell could easily . . .

I exited and paused at the door of the women's powder room. Was there anyone in there now?

I waited five minutes. I was just about to push open the door when two women marched out. They stared at me in passing.

I decided to wait another ten minutes before making another attempt to enter the room.

Four minutes passed and three women swept past me and entered the powder room.

I began timing from zero again.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and found at my elbow a large tuxedoed man, possibly a bouncer.

"Why are you staring at that door?" he asked.

I laughed lightly. "I was waiting for my wife to come out, but I guess I missed her. What did you think I was doing?"

"I'm afraid to guess."

I left him and went to the bar. The afternoon bartender was off-shift, but there were three others on duty now and all of them busy. I finally got the attention of one of them. I raised my voice above the din: "Pardon me, but I'd like some information. Have you ever been in the women's powder room?"

He cupped his ear. "Huh?"

"I'd like to know how many windows the room has, how big are they, are they barred, and if they are, what is the general condition of the bars."

He looked pained. "I never been in the women's john in my life, mister. All I do is mix drinks. Order something I know."

I sighed and decided that the information I wanted might better be obtained by other means. Possibly I could ask some woman, or simply wait until tomorrow when the place was less crowded and I could see for myself.

I rejoined Rodell at my table.

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"So you're a manager? I suppose
you have other singers and enter-
tainers in your . . . ah . . .
stable?"

"Just Amy." He took a long
pull from the drink he'd ordered
while I was gone.

I listened to Amy Adams con-
clude another number. Yes, her
voice was unquestionably thin.
Did she have a personality? A
flair? She appeared lean and lank
to me, with neutrally short brown
hair. Did others see something I
didn't?

I saw Wister standing next to a
wall with apparently nothing to
do at the moment. I excused my-
self and approached him. "Does
the women's powder room have a
window?"

He gave it frowning thought. "I
think so. But to tell you the truth,
I don't ever remember being in
there. Why do you want to
know?"

"I'm certain that the killing had
nothing to do with the syndicate.
The killer was an amateur, so to
speak, and he wasn't after
McGeorge at all."

"After Cullen? But he shouted
'McGeorge.'" He rubbed his jaw.
"A diversion? He knew McGeorge
was here, or at least he thought
McGeorge was here? He had seen
McGeorge enter the Blue Bud-
gie?"

"If he did, then why did he
wait forty-five minutes before go-
ing in and shooting Cullen? No,
the killer waited forty-five minutes
until he was certain that
McGeorge and his bodyguards
would *not* be there. He couldn't
risk any one of them drawing a
gun and shooting back in the con-
fusion of the event. Unfortunately,
from his point of view, he did not
know that an off-duty policeman
was at the bar."

"He saw McGeorge leave?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have been
watching the back of the build-
ing?"

"No. If he followed McGeorge
in the first place and saw him en-
tering the front of the building,
logically that's where he could ex-
pect him to exit. But McGeorge
and his friends left by a rear door.
The killer couldn't have known
that McGeorge was gone if he'd
still been out in front. Therefore,
I come to the conclusion that he
was waiting neither in the front of
the building nor the back."

"Then where was he?"

"Right here in the barroom of
the Plaid Budgie."

"Blue Budgie." Wister's eyes
rested on Rodell still at my table.
"Rodell said he was in the lava-
tory. But could it have been the
women's . . ."

I nodded. "The men's lavatory window is solidly barred. I don't know about the window in the women's powder room, but I suspect that Rodell slipped through it, ran around to the front of the building, shot Cullen, and then doubled back to reenter the building the same way he'd left."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"I can't find a motive," I said. "Why did he kill Cullen? And there's something else nagging at my mind, though I can't put my finger on it at the moment."

I returned to my table, leaving Wister to examine the powder room should the opportunity present itself.

Rodell watched me sit down again. "You'll never find the killer. He's probably a thousand miles away by now."

"It wasn't a syndicate killing," I said. "And the killer wasn't after McGeorge."

Rodell appeared to let the information sink in. "I just thought of something. Suppose McGeorge did the shooting himself? What better alibi could he have, so to speak, then to walk in and yell 'McGeorge,' like he was really looking for McGeorge, and then shoot Cullen? The last person the police would think of would be McGeorge himself."

I stared at him. "If he wanted

Cullen dead, he could easily have somebody else do the job for him. And what reason could he have for wanting to kill Cullen?"

Rodell shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it was something personal and he wanted the pleasure of doing the work himself."

I drummed my fingers on the table. That *was* a new element.

Rodell took a long swallow from his glass. "It could have been me."

"What could have been you?"

"I could have been lying there on the floor instead of Cullen. That was my bar stool. I just finished my drink and had to go to the can. Cullen must've come into the place while I was gone and took my seat." His face paled at a new thought and he spilled his drink. "Why would McGeorge want to shoot *me*?"

In the background, Amy Adams was at it again. Damn it, didn't the woman know when to quit?

I watched Rodell use a handkerchief to wipe the drink from his coat and trousers.

I closed my eyes for a moment and then rose. I searched for and found Wister.

"Have you come up with a motive?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You're going to arrest Rodell?"

"I might have before, only

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where did he get the extra pair of
trousers?"

"Extra trousers? What trou-
sers?"

"As the killer was making his
escape, Officer Campbell creased
his posterior with a bullet, no
doubt destroying the seat of the
trousers, not to mention the
shorts, and possibly inflicting some
physical damage as well. The
killer would have required the im-
mediate facilities of a washroom,
some bandages perhaps, and cer-
tainly another pair of trousers. He
could have skipped the shorts, I
suppose, since it was an emer-
gency situation. Now, where could
Rodell have gotten those extra
trousers in a hurry?"

Wister cleared his throat.
"There's a washroom adjoining my
office. And he could have stolen
the pants from my office."

"But he couldn't have worn
them. He's a quite heavy man.
The trousers would have been an
obvious misfit and we would have
noticed." I smiled. "Would you
care to sit down while we talk
about this further?"

He seemed a bit grim. "I prefer
to stand."

I almost pointed. "You, sir, es-
corted McGeorge and his body-
guards out of the rear door. You
waited until they were out of
sight, then you ran around to the

front of the building, shot Cullen,
and returned to your office at the
rear of the building. There you
quickly attended to your posterior,
changed pants, and joined the hor-
rified customers a few moments
before the squad cars arrived. The
room was dim and for all anybody
knew, you had been there in the
background throughout the entire
incident. Nobody counted noses.
Besides, everyone, including the
police, automatically assumed that
it was an outside job. There ap-
peared to be no reason to suspect
anyone inside the building."

"This is ridiculous," Wister
snapped. "What possible motive
could I have for killing Cullen?"

"But Cullen's death really *was*
an accident. Your intended victim
was Rodell, but the light was bad.
You probably didn't even know
you'd shot Cullen instead until
later. When you last saw Rodell,
he had been sitting on that par-
ticular stool and you expected him
to still be there when you came in
the front door."

"And what reason could I have
for wanting to kill Rodell?"

I smiled. "No matter how you
slice it, Amy Adams has a voice
utterly without distinction. Yet
you've kept her here for three
months. Usually an entertainer is
booked for a week or two and
then moves on. Why have you

kept Amy Adams for so long?"

"None of your business."

"I suppose you haven't disposed of the gun, torn trousers, and *et cetera* yet, especially since you felt quite safe? Cullen was the victim and no one could possibly connect you with him?"

"I demand to see my lawyer."

I nodded. "And I suppose Amy Adams will need one too? She's your accomplice, isn't she? After we grill, interrogate, question, hound, and humiliate her, I imagine the truth will come out."

The gentleman in him came to the fore, as I suspected it might. "She had absolutely nothing to do with this. It was my idea entirely. Rodell is a lush and a leech, but she wouldn't leave him." He sighed and looked longingly at a nearby chair. "I sure wish it were possible for me to sit down. I've been on my feet all day."

At nine the next morning, I bought a cigarette lighter and went to the nearest phone booth. I put through a call to Dora

McGeorge with some trepidation.

"How did you get my number?" she asked.

"I just happened to notice it on one of your telephones the last time I was there. I called because I just discovered that I accidentally pocketed your cigarette lighter when I left yesterday."

"It can't be mine. I don't smoke."

"Your father's?"

"He doesn't smoke either."

"Hannigan? Freddie? Eddie?"

"Nope."

"You mean I spent \$12.50 on a cigarette lighter that nobody's going to claim?"

"I'm afraid so. On the other hand, if you'll look in the right-hand pocket of your suit, you'll find one of my very favorite bookmarks and I haven't the faintest idea how it got there."

"I'll have it dusted for fingerprints."

"That won't be at all necessary. Just return it and no questions asked."

I was there in twenty minutes.



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